United Nations E/2010/NGO/51

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
4 May 2010

Original: English

Substantive session of 2010
New York, 28 June-22 July 2010
Item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda*
Annual ministerial review: implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to gender equality and empowerment of women

Statement submitted by Salesian Missions, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2010/100.

10-34685 (E) 110610

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Statement

Legal empowerment of those living in poverty: an important protection for women

Much has been written about the feminization of poverty and how this has negatively impacted families and societies. Many point to the expansion of microcredit and microfinancing as a means of helping women rise above subsistence living. In the various plans and procedures that have been proposed to address poverty, what has often been neglected is confronting in earnest the systemic structures that exclude women from having a true voice and being recognized as equal human beings. The time to address this inequity is now. It must be addressed by and enshrined in law. The laws, in turn, must be promulgated and enforced.

The Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor found that 4 billion people around the world are prevented from improving their lives and moving out of poverty because they are excluded from the rule of law. Many of these excluded individuals are women. The legal empowerment of women living in poverty can be a necessary condition to create an enabling environment for providing sustainable livelihoods and eradicating poverty.

The need for legal empowerment arises from discrimination and inequalities in women's access to and ownership of land and property, the roles they hold in the labour market and exclusionary inheritance practices in some societies. It is clear that it is not the total absence of assets or lack of work that holds women back, but the fact that the assets and work are insecure, unprotected and far less productive than they could be. Women constitute half the world's population and produce 60 to 80 per cent of the food in developing countries. They are increasingly responsible for rural households. However, they own less than 10 per cent of the world's property. Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of property rights as a fundamental human right; yet, women have legal and cultural obstacles that inhibit or remove this right. This injustice has severe negative consequences for women, families and society at large, and should be corrected.

Empowering women with property rights has been shown to be a strong force for change, helping communities to overcome poverty and malnutrition. Ensuring that women have effective property rights strengthens families and businesses because, as women earn more, they tend to spend a larger percentage of their income on keeping their children healthy and well-fed.

Many women who do not work in agriculture form the backbone of the informal economy in many regions. But informal institutions can leave them vulnerable to corruption, exploitation, bureaucratic meddling and criminals. Economic transactions remain unpredictable, insecure and limited.

We encourage all Governments and major stakeholders to heed and enforce the recommendations of the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, providing for the protection of the legal identity and rights of women and girls, especially in the areas of land and business ownership.